

## **Appropriations Committee Public Hearing on Governor's Proposed Budget**

**February 22, 2013**

### **Testimony of Ursula L. Haerter, President of The Children's Law Center of Connecticut, Inc.**

Good evening. My name is Ursula Haerter. I am President of The Children's Law Center of Connecticut ("CLC"), and I am here to urge you to save the tax dollars of Connecticut citizens by restoring the funding of CLC that was eliminated in Governor Malloy's recent budget proposal.

CLC receives \$150,000 annually from the state legislature. By complementing the work of certain state agencies and courts, CLC's programs increase efficiencies, helping to save precious taxpayer dollars while delivering needed services that are not provided by any other organization.

The Children's Law Center is in its 20<sup>th</sup> year of protecting vulnerable, poor children in the family court process in Connecticut. These children are entangled in the most difficult of high conflict divorce, custody and visitation cases, involving parents without means and typically without attorneys, who have significant, chronic issues, such as substance abuse, mental health issues or domestic violence. These types of cases are often among the most protracted in the courts.

Of our three programs, CLC's cornerstone is our legal representation program. We provide court appointed legal representation for children in family court matters and post-judgment monitoring services, at no cost to the families. By working with the parents and children to determine what resources can assist the families and what orders would work best to address the lives of our child clients, our attorneys successfully settle 76% of their cases. When court orders issue, CLC attorney

recommendations are accepted 99% of the time. In 77% of CLC's closed cases, the parties do not return to court, sparing additional court resources. Perhaps the strongest indication of CLC's success is that the demand from the courts for appointments often exceeds our capacity. In this regard, we have also provided at no cost to the judicial department our services in training attorneys to represent children through the Regional Academy of Child Advocates.

CLC also provides a mediation program, Families in Transition, designed to divert high conflict families out of the court system and provide them the opportunity to create parenting plans that are appropriate for their children. With a means based fee schedule, CLC offers the only area mediation service for low income families. Over 80% of our clients are referred by the courts and many are court mandated to attend. By securing agreed resolutions through mediation, CLC helps unclog court dockets.

CLC's third program, the Law Line, assists callers by giving information, advice and referrals regarding issues that affect children. Callers who often cannot afford attorneys of their own are educated about the court system by trained staff personnel, directly resulting in increased efficiencies in case processing as parties navigate the court system with greater competence. In addition, the majority of referrals to the Law Line come from the State of Connecticut, namely, DCF, the Courts, Probation, Family Relations, and 211, saving these referral sources from training and maintaining staff to respond to such inquiries.

CLC's programs currently extend to eight (8) court jurisdictions serving 89 Connecticut towns. To provide its programs in a single jurisdiction costs CLC more than \$100,000. Without the support of the funding from the state legislature, CLC's ability to maintain its current level of service will be in serious jeopardy.

Taxpayers receive a significant return on their investment in CLC through its programs. Please continue to recognize the value of the services provided by The Children's Law Center and restore its funding in the amount of \$150,000.

Thank you.